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GEORGE WATTERSON

MR. SMITH'S DESCRIPTION OF WASHINGTON

National Intelligencer, August 26, 1847

In the brief but interesting description of Washington in 1800 by Mr. John Cotton Smith, published in the Intelligencer of Friday last, I find that he has fallen into one or two errors, which it may be proper to correct. "The surface of the city generally", he observes, "being covered with scrub-oak bushes on the higher grounds and on the marshy soil either trees of some sort of shrubbery". The scrub-oak was not grown in this District. The trees which covered the surface of the city at the period it was laid out, consisted of the oak, hickory, walnut, pine, chestnut, &c. of the largest growth, and what Mr. Smith saw was the undergrowth which had been left after the forests had been felled. By an agreement entered into between the original proprietors and the commissioners of the city, all the wood on the lands of the former was to be their property; but if any should be desired by the President of the United States, or left standing, it was to be paid for by the Government, at a just and reasonable valuation, exclusive of the amount paid for the lands. It is much to be regretted that the native forest trees which originally covered a large portion of the surface of our city, had not been permitted to remain where the avenues run or the public reservations were laid off. These now would have been a beautiful ornament to the city; but, as no proposition of this sort was made to the proprietors, and as they had received no compensation for the lands occupied by the avenues, streets and open spaces, and had given about the half of the ground formed into squares and lots, they reserved to themselves the wood with which the land was covered, and either consumed it or disposed of it to their own advantage. Before the period spoken of by Mr. Smith the trees had been filled, with the exception of a few in the Capitol square and other places, all of

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which have now disappeared. Of the condition of our metropolis, some years prior to the period referred to, I transcribe a brief extract from a work I am now preparing on the city: "As my eye glanced upon the imposing and massive structure near me, and ranged over the extended landscape reposing in the softness of moonlight, my mind insensibly reverted to the condition of our metropolis, when, as a woodland scene, it first burst upon my boyish eye. I remembered distinctly the windings of the picturesque stream called the Tiber, gliding along between magnificent oaks, and underwood, and expanding almost to the magnitude of a river as it flowed into the broad Potomac. This stream was once called Goose Creek and, in spring and autumn, overspread with wild ducks, and often penetrated as far as the present Railroad depot by multitudes of shad, herrings, pike, perch, &c. It is said to have derived its classical name from a European who owned a farm near the Capitol, and whose name was Pope. But it is called the Tiber in deeds nearly two centuries old. He called his farm Rome, the stream at the bottom of it the Tiber, and the hill above Capitol Hill, on which he is said to have predicted, many years before the event took place, that a magnificent edifice would be erected which would be called the Capitol".

"Instead of recognizing", says Mr. Smith, "the avenues and streets portrayed on the plan of the city, not one was visible, unless we except a road with two buildings on each side of it, called the New Jersey avenue".

This is an error; long before 1800 the leading avenues were formed by cutting down the trees in the woods through which they passed, and could be distinctly seen from the Capitol. In 1793, however, the road leading from the President's House (called by the Commissioner the President's Palace) to the Capitol, passed near the present General Post Office building, about two squares north of the Avenue, and the Tiber was crossed by a rude bridge formed of a single log, and a little above by a few large stones, which, when the water was low, rendered

the creek fordable. It was along this road that the procession, headed by General Washington passed to lay the corner-stone of the Capitol; and, though the numbers composing this procession were not great, it took them some time to cross the log bridge of which I have spoken. The ceremony was concluded with a barbecue given in honor of the occasion, not far from the spot where he afterwards erected two fine brick buildings, which were destroyed by the British army, under General Ross, during the last war. The spring from which the water was obtained was at the bottom of the hill on which the houses referred to stood, and is still there, and labitus et labitur in onme volubilis aevum. The public road leading into Montgomery county wound round the hill and passed within a few yards of this spring which was sheltered by large oak trees, some of which were standing as late as the year 1815. Mr. Smith is correct in saying that the only two really comfortable habitations in all respects, within the bounds of the city at that time, were those of Daniel (not Dudley) Carroll and Notley Young, two of the original proprietors. The old domicil of Mr. Carroll, in consequence of its being on part of a street, was pulled down by Major L'Infant, the engineer, and, as it would seem, without the order of the Commissioners, who subsequently dismissed him for it, and another more spacious one, built in its stead, which is now occupied by the worthy and venerable citizen. At the commencement of the city the only brick building on the banks of the Potomac was the one owned, and occupied by Mr. Notley Young. It was built of brick imported from England about fifty years before, was beautifully situated, and the grounds around it highly improved. From the want of a church, this house was occasionally used as a place of worship by the Roman Catholics, and the officiating priest, at the time alluded to, was the Rev. Mr. Plunkett. Mr. Young's house, like Mr. Carroll's, was on one of the streets; but, in consequence of the interposition of General Washington, who wrote to the Commissioners on the subject, it was allowed to stand, but is very different from what it once was.

The north wing of the Capitol alone was finished at the time of which Mr. Smith speaks. The first Senate Chamber occupied about the same space as it now does, except that the floor was in the first story, and extended in a semi-circle to the roof. The present Court room did not then exist. The Chamber prepared for the accomodation of the House of Representatives was in the western part of the building and extended nearly the whole length of the wing from north to south. The access to the gallery of both chambers was by a hanging staircase, which sprung from the first floor in the small rotundo in the southern part of the wing, and contained a circular gallery, from which you entered the different doors. The Library, then small, was placed in a room south of the Senate Chamber, now used, in part as a committee room. The original plan furnished by Dr. Thornton was almost wholly changed by Mr. Latrobe, who subsequently became the architect of the Capitol, and who was a man of fine taste and great skill in his profession.

The block of houses spoken of by Mr. Smith as being east of the Capitol, was a large brick building erected by Mr. Daniel Carroll, and occupied by Mr. ~~Stills~~ Stull as a tavern, and another adjoining the large edifice built for the accomodation of Congress after the late war, and occupied by a Mr. Tunnecliff, called the City Hotel. There was another block built by Mr. Thomas Law, on the New Jersey Avenue, called the Ten Buildings, in which the National Intelligencer was first issued.

Mrs. John Adams thus speaks of the city in 1801: "Here and there", she writes, "is a small cot, without a glass window, interspersed among the forests, through which you travel for miles without seeing a human being. The house is upon a grand and superb scale, requiring about 30 servants to keep the apartments in proper order. I could content myself almost anywhere three months; but, surrounded by forests, can you believe that wood is not to be had, because people cannot be found to cut and cart it? The house is made habitable, but there is not a single

apartment in it finished. We have not the least fence, yard, or other convenience without, and the great unfinished audience room I make a drying room of, to hang up the clothes in. It is a beautiful spot, capable of every improvement and the more I view it the more I am delighted with it."

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